

# Virgins as Masochine

Hagiographic Pleasures:  
Understanding Catholic Adolescent Female Saints

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by Dr. Donald L. Boisvert  
Department of Religion, Concordia University

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M. Goretti  
used in  
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If I mention the names of Kateri Tekakwitha, Maria Goretti, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia or Agatha, Catholics of the pre-Vatican II generation will recognize them as belonging to a particular category of female saints known as “virgins,” or, in the case of everyone but Kateri, “virgin martyrs.” My current research centres on the different strategies by which Roman Catholic exemplars of adolescent sainthood—both female and male—, as defined and mediated through the pedagogical work of Catholic religious teaching orders, became highly privileged means for modelling, forging and controlling adolescent sexual identity and behaviour in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century North America. In this perspective, the saintly female body always was—and still is—the site of contested religious and sexual discourses. My purpose here is to sketch out some of the salient aspects of this process, while raising one or two key methodological concerns.

The study of the literature of saints’ lives—hagiology—can sometimes give rise to a form of misplaced, though sincere, devotional amnesia, as though that which is being described, as legendary as it may be, is the whole truth and nothing but. That, of course, is generally not the case. Hagiography—the writing of saints’ lives—is very much of an inventive art. Saints are eminently plastic figures; they can be moulded to suit a variety of political, theological, cultural or even economic interests, and they often are. For the scholar of religion, interpretation of saints’ lives can often be a slippery slope. When it

comes to female adolescent saints, the risk doubles. There is the compounded issue of gender and age. More often than not, gender stands as a highly suspect and problematic category in the patriarchal religious imagination. And in the religious worlds of adults, saintly adolescence (or youth) fares no better. ~~Studying saints' lives and the sociological meanings attached to them, as pleasurable as the exercise may be, is therefore inherently~~ risky business. How do we respect and honour, while simultaneously deconstructing?

Let me take the case of Maria Goretti, a twelve year old Italian saint who died in 1902 after being stabbed repeatedly for refusing to submit to the sexual advances of a nineteen-year-old farmhand. She was canonized in 1950, at the time that secular youth culture was coming into its own in the West. Maria Goretti became the Catholic model for young girls, who were strongly encouraged to be like her, even to the point of death, in defending their bodily integrity. She was the first female martyr to be canonized, not for having died for the faith, but because she fought for her virginity—a clear indication of the worth of chastity and purity as desirable and legitimate Catholic values, especially during that supposedly dangerous period of life known as adolescence.

In the '50s and '60s, St. Maria Goretti became a bit of a Catholic cottage industry. Her story attracted the most sensationalistic, heroic, misogynistic and sexually repressive readings. In North America, she became somewhat of a middle-class saint, embodying middle-class sexual norms and expectations. She also bore the brunt of much adolescent sexual humour. Yet, as Kathleen Norris so aptly observes: "For Maria Goretti, the issue was not a roll in the hay. The loss of her virginity in a rigidly patriarchal peasant culture could have had economic and social consequences so dire that it might well have seemed a choice between being and nonbeing. And is it foolish for a girl to have such a strong

sense of her self that she resists its violation, resists being asked to do, in the private spaces of her body, what she does not want to do?" (The Cloister Walk, 192) Indeed, that is the question. Or, put more generally: Why do the bodies of young female saints—and especially ones that are almost violated—become loaded with so much heavily symbolic baggage? Sainly male bodies are not, or at least not to the same degree.

This, of course, should not really surprise us. Feminist scholarship has taught us remarkably well that the female body has always been the site of contested discourses of power, including specifically religious ones. All kinds of readings are projected onto the female body—sometimes to the point that one loses a sense of the identity of the person behind the symbol. Kathleen Norris, speaking of Maria Goretti once again, asks whether she was “cipher or saint?” (223) Much of this, we know, is tied up with the male gaze. It is men who so often are doing the looking, in every sense of the word. It is they who, by virtue of privilege, get to circumscribe the discourse, and it is they who get to dissect and label the saintly female body in its component parts. It is men, after all, who canonize, who get to sanction orthodoxy. Though it may be satisfactory, however, is this really a sufficient explanation? Where is the female saint’s agency in all this? As Norris quite explicitly suggests: who ultimately controls the private spaces of the female saint’s body?

In working with the story of St. Maria Goretti, the hagiographic entanglements are especially dense. “Exploitation is at the heart of Maria Goretti’s story,” Kathleen Norris observes (223), and that is true. Not only the attempted exploitation by her murderer, but also the countless ways in which her holy tale—part fact, part fiction—has been used and reused in the service of a multiplicity of agendas. What does it mean to say that Maria should be the ideal model of virginity for Catholic girls, or indeed for all youth? What is

the church saying about adolescent sexuality more generally, but female bodily integrity more specifically? Maria has been interpreted, in turn, as a model of penitence, of proper family life, of bourgeois respectability, of the romance and spiritual innocence of peasant illiteracy, of the proper response to attempted rape, of Christian forgiveness, of female naiveté, and, certainly not least, as a source of bawdy religious and ethnic humour. One could say this is a great deal of responsibility to put on the shoulders of a twelve-year-old girl, as saintly as she may have been, though it does show how wonderfully polyvalent and powerful the figure of the saint can in fact be. What is the meaning of each of these spins on Maria Goretti's story? What are the "whys" and, equally important, what are the ways in which the spins were first constructed?

These are only some of the challenges confronted by the scholar working with hagiographic texts and saintly personages. She or he needs, not so much to discard the levels of interpretation—because these levels can in fact give you valuable information (they are, after all, how the saint's life is read and made meaningful)—but rather strive to create linkages between them. What does it mean, for example, that a young and devout Italian peasant girl from the 19<sup>th</sup> century should be used to instruct a Canadian adolescent girl of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> on how to respect her body? How does this adolescent "read" the life but most especially the violent death of Maria Goretti? With reverence, or with a certain measure of youthful impudence? And how does the scholar in turn "read" the adolescent "reading" the saint? Robert Orsi has done some important work on the role of saints in the construction of 20<sup>th</sup> century American Catholic identities. He has argued that saints, and the devotional patterns to them, shape communities and the human ties which nourish and sustain them. Saints are real cultural actors, part of the social fabric of people's lives.

He goes so far as to claim that they should be approached and studied as such. In terms of method, this is an incredibly liberating perspective. In the first place, it treats the saint as the saint is treated by the devotee: as a real person who makes a difference in her life. But also, it opens up multiple places for finding meaning—all those nooks and crannies that hide what the saint does, but also what she or he may say or hint at, give or choose to hold back, offer or take—that is, in the same ways humans so often relate to each other.

At the heart of every female saint's story—that of St. Maria Goretti or any of the countless others—stands one incontrovertible fact, one dynamic: that of power. It comes in different guises, and it can be spoken by different players in the drama. It can be the voice of masculine authority asserting patriarchal power over chaste or unmarried female flesh, very often to the point of physical violence. It can equally be the cold, confident gaze of the saint herself speaking “no” to that power, thereby claiming authority and integrity for herself, choosing being over non-being. It can be the power of a churchly male voice raising certain models of submissive femaleness to the glory of the altars. Or it can be these models redefined and re-appropriated in all their “hidden” power—women of character and fortitude who have gone where no man has gone before. And this power invariably ripples out; power can generate power. The saintly female body can become a model—in an incredibly empowering way—for other female bodies. The core question always is: who gets to define what the model means? And even that is an open and ever shifting question. Everyone has a stake in it.

The one ever-present danger—and it is a serious one—is reducing the female saint to the female body, which only serves to play further into patriarchal discourse. In many ways, this is exactly what happened to Maria Goretti. She did become a cipher: a person

defined by nothing more than her intact virginity, a template by and through which were read and forged—indeed, controlled—the virginal bodies of other Catholic girls. Perhaps such a process is inevitable, but I think not. As Orsi suggests, our perspective needs to shift more to a relational one. It needs to move from a focus on saints “out there” to one on saints “in here,” partners in the give and take of social life. And partners, of course, represent much more than bodies—though, as we all know, bodies are certainly where the most sublime and lasting stuff happens, and thankfully stays written. Saintly female bodies, in intimate and ongoing relation with us, are, in the end, no different.

Thank you.